

European Schools Chess Championship

Report 1

Day 1 was an unequivocal success, a watershed moment for Irish Chess as the first tournament of such calibre found its way onto the soil of University Limerick. The opening ceremony which took place at 11am, featured breathtaking performances from local schools as well as an impressive solo performance on the uilleann pipes, a traditional Irish instrument. The ceremony also featured prestigious speeches from the organiser, the mayor of Limerick, as well as the official European chess union representative. And concluded with an olympic style parade of flags beared by representatives of each of the national delegations. The players had to maintain their excitement as later in the same day the first round began.

G7

The Under 7s Girls' section is the smallest of the tournament with just nine players, making this one an all-play-all tournament. The top seed - and the only rated player - is the Romanian Maria-Ioana Ramureanu, and she started with victory over one of the four Icelandic girls in the section, Audur Lilja Freysdottir, who displayed a reluctance to recapture until the one time when to recapture was to hang mate in one.

But the younger age groups in this are really all about gaining experience - so Birta Hardardottir will surely remember that a knight on the rim is dim after getting hers trapped on a5 and h5, while in the Turkish derby between Miray Akinci and Kumsay Islek, the latter reached this position as black -

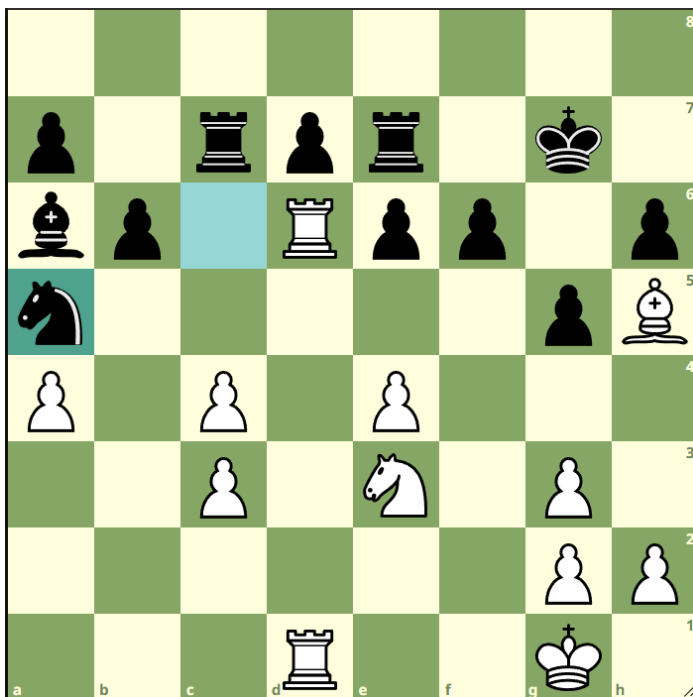


Here, she thought she was winning a piece with 1...NxB, because 2.RxB hangs back-rank mate. But it's not so simple - white replied 2.RxR and now black erred again with 2...RxR, reinstating the back-rank mate threat if white takes the knight on c3, but allowing 3.Nd7+, losing the rook. Instead, had black started with 1...BxN, then white's threat is gone and black can then win the bishop on c3.

O7

The Open Under 7's has a large contingent of Icelandic players, indeed in the first round we saw two intracountry matches. With no rated players in the section it'll be anyone's guess as to comes out on top in the end.

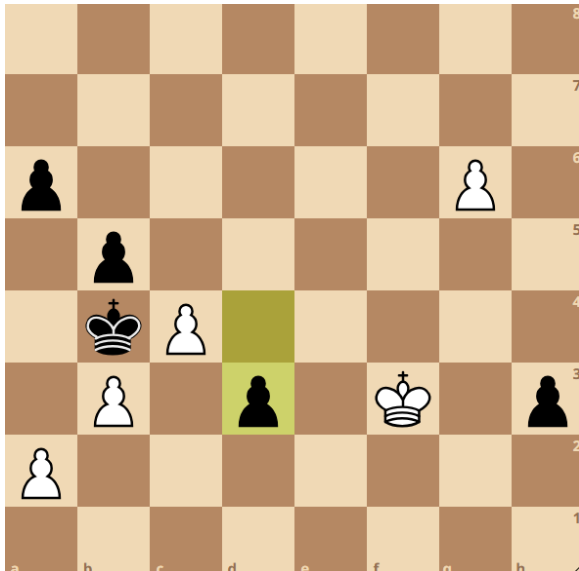
Amandeep Singh of England might be one to watch as they pulled off an impressive victory against the Turkish Bugra Gurbuz. After the queens were swapped, Singh was able to take advantage of the superior pawn structure and coax white into overextending allowing Singh to trap one of the doubled rooks on e6. From there it was still complicated and white almost regained the exchange, however an inaccurate move order led the rooks to be swapped and another Turkish pawn was lost leading to a straightforward endgame for Singh to convert.



In this position white played R1e4? An understandable mistake that demonstrates why having strategic weaknesses such as poor pawn structure can make it easier to make tactical mistakes.

G9

The Under 9 Girls section has 10 players from seven countries, which means it's also an all-play-all, though with no rest day. It also started with a Turkish derby, between Eslem Tolan and Masal Budumlu. This ended in a rook and pawn ending and a draw, but it could have been quite different. In this position -



- white (Eslem) is drawing with 1.g7, but instead she played 1.Kd3??, presumably worried about black promoting either pawn with check. Now black is winning, but it's not trivial - the game continued 1...h2 2.g7 h1=Q 3.g8=Q and now after 3...Qh3+, it is a draw again, and that's what was agreed on the next move. Instead, after 3...Kc3 (Qd1 is the only other winning move, with a similar plan) black plans to run her other pawn. If 4.Qg7+ (white's only check) Kc2 5.Qg6 (pinning the pawn) Qe1+ 6.Kd4 Qc3+, black will push the white king away and get her own king to b2, when the pawn can run and any checks can be blocked.

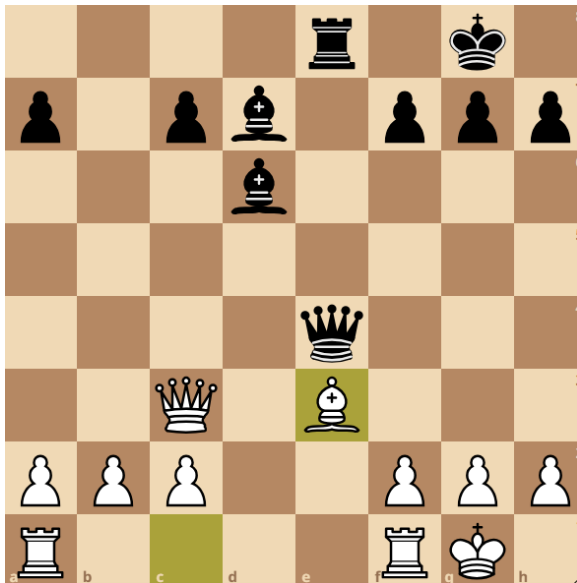
It was the only draw of the round - in the Romanian derby, top seed Anne-Sophie Constantin-Ciuntu got off to a winning start against Melania-Cristina Grigore, winning a huge b5 pawn which gave her a passer on c5; her opponent's position was so bad for the loss of a pawn that she soon had to give up a piece to stop white promoting. Irmak Keser of Turkey accounted for Ukraine's Bierta Gutserieva, though not without drama - having won a rook in the opening, she built on that to add a piece and a couple of pawns - before checking with a rook, completely overlooking that her opponent could recapture! The 47 move game was over in 90 minutes, and while there have been faster games, it's still a nice lesson to not get too excited when the game is on the verge of being won.

Helena Taradajko of Poland beat Ireland's Khushi Maddu in a rook and pawn ending, courtesy of a far better pawn structure and an outside passed pawn which she could afford to lose while mopping up her opponent's remaining pawns. Maria Pavlova of Bulgaria had a nice finish against Aria Bjork Danielsdottir, who missed that a defended piece couldn't be recaptured as back-rank mate hung. Helena v Anna-Sophie is the only round 2 match between two players who won their opening ties.

O9

The home nation make up the bulk of the 19-player panel in the Under 9s, including the top seed, Sreeyan Andhurthi (1684). He started with a win against Aaron-Mathias Dragoi of Romania where, despite starting with an unusual line of the French where after six moves he had his bishop on f3 and knight on e2 (when it's far more often the other way around!), it was soon his opponent who was tangled up in knots, with all four remaining pieces (knight, rook, bishop and king) on the back rank. Inevitably there were tactics, and a piece was picked up, which made the rest trivial.

There was an interesting game between third seed Lucas Zheng of Wales and the unrated Icelandic Hafthor Haarde Vignisson. Hafthor grabbed an ill-advised pawn early in the opening, and Lucas picked up an exchange (although he would have been much better advised to win the full piece instead). But when he then took a pawn as well, the computer scored the position level. He missed the best line, but compensation is compensation, and a couple of moves later he had a nice attack. How should black continue here?



1...Bc6 wins a piece - white has to defend mate with 2.f3, when the bishop on e3 hangs. Unfortunately when he missed this as well, the attack petered out and white delivered back rank a few moves later. A let-off for one of the top seeds for sure!

Adhvik Kumar of Ireland beat Turkey's Bora Sahin with the help of the same tactic twice - first with his queen on h3, he dropped a rook to d2, and mate on g2 was only avoided by giving up queen for rook. Ten moves later, the queen was on a8, but a rook dropped to d2 again, and this time there was no stopping mate on g2.

This is a tight section overall, with just 250 points separating the 11 rated players, and 130 points separating seeds 2 to 10.

G11

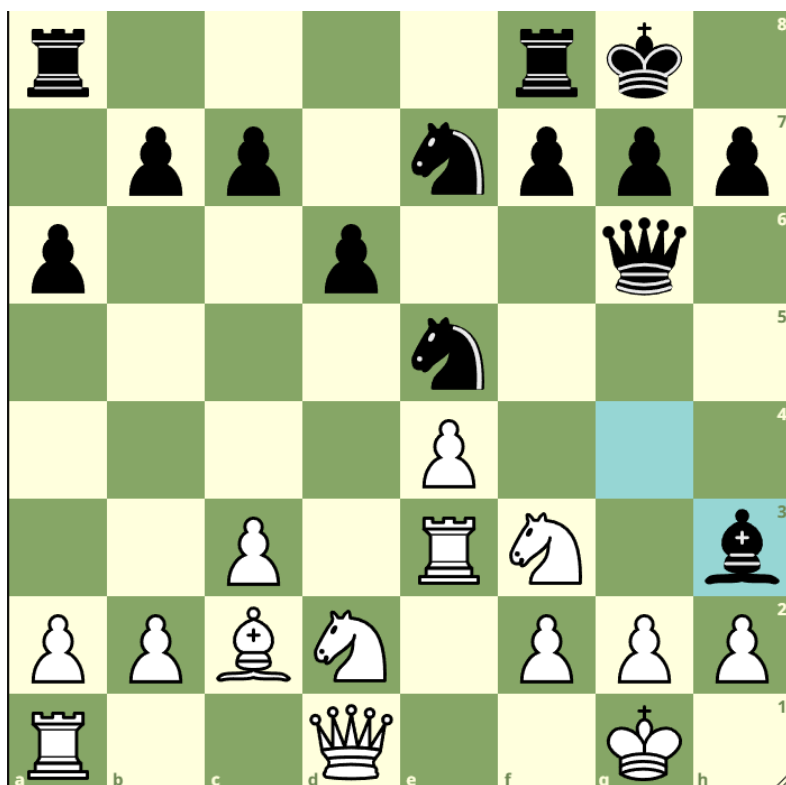
The girls under 11s is a 10-player all-play all style tournament. Emma Cretescu, is the strongest rated player in the girls under 11. Her competition includes several strong Turkish players in the 1500 range. In this round Cretescu was playing against Lorena Putar from Ireland.



In this position Black played Bf5, a very reasonable move. However, much better would have been 1...Ng4!! Threatening the white knight on h4 with a discovery attack. If white plays 2.fxg4 Qxgh4 and white will have to sacrifice her rook on the f-file to prevent checkmate. 2.Qe1 Nxe3 3. Fxe4 Nxc2 4.Qf2 Nxa1 5.Bxa1 and Black is two pawns up with comfortable chances.

O11

For the Under 11's Open the largest contingent is that of Ireland, almost all of whom are unrated. Most of the results were fairly expected, leaving the top seeds Ali Uzdemir (Tur), Murat Gokturk(Tur) and Razvan-George Parvu leading the section. The only upset of the section was won by Liam Moran (Ire) who beat Eloi Luque (Spa).



In this position Liam Moran has just played the forever-tempting move 1...Bh3 with Queen pinning the pawn to the king. However in this position the move is not so fruitful as white can respond with 2. Nh4 attacking the queen and defending the g2 pawn. Black then responded with 2...Bg4 and white, playing quickly, failed to take advantage of Liam's mistake, playing 3.f3 when in fact simply taking the queen on g6 leads to a winning position for white. It is often the case in chess that one mistake leads to another, and that is what tragically occurred to Eloi as black proceed with 3...Qh6 and white hurriedly protected his knight with 4.g3 missing the diagonal attack on the rook.

G13

The Girls' U13 tournament has been blown open after the top seed, Turkey's Arya Aydogan, was held to a draw by another of the large Turkish contingent in Limerick, Kayla Nil Zeybek, in a fairly uneventful game which went to a rook and pawn ending which Ayra couldn't convert, though not for want of trying. But second seed Nemhain Doolin couldn't take advantage, opening her king up too much in the opening, at which her Turkish opponent simply castled long and launched a direct attack which ended in mate. So instead on top board tomorrow will be Nemhain's twin sister Bedhbh, who had already won a piece before her opponent hung a rook and mate in one in the same move.

At this point, some of our foreign readers may be wondering how on earth you're supposed to pronounce Irish names - "dhhb" is a letter combination which surely can't exist in many languages! How to approach it? It mightn't help things to note that "h" isn't really a letter in Irish; it's an accent which softens the previous consonant, usually turning it to some sort of "v" sound (the letter h is a recent addition to the Irish alphabet as its 18th letter; previously it was indicated by a dot over the consonant). So in this case, you can say Nevin and Bev - they're two of the three Mór-ríoghan, or great queens of Irish mythology; names going back thousands of years.

Bedhbh will play the second seed tomorrow, the Turkish player Yudum Cagla Sahin, who won a pawn early on which gave her a huge rolling pawn centre, and material had to be given up to stop part of it, but the rest of it made its way to c7 to deliver the point. Nemhain will play the top seed somewhat earlier and on a lower board than expected! Bottom board is an Icelandic derby; the other five boards see four different nationalities have white against five different Turks.

O13

The open under 13's has a strong base with 3 players over 2000 rating. There was only one result that was not a win for the higher rated player and that came from the 2nd seed which ended in a draw.

G15

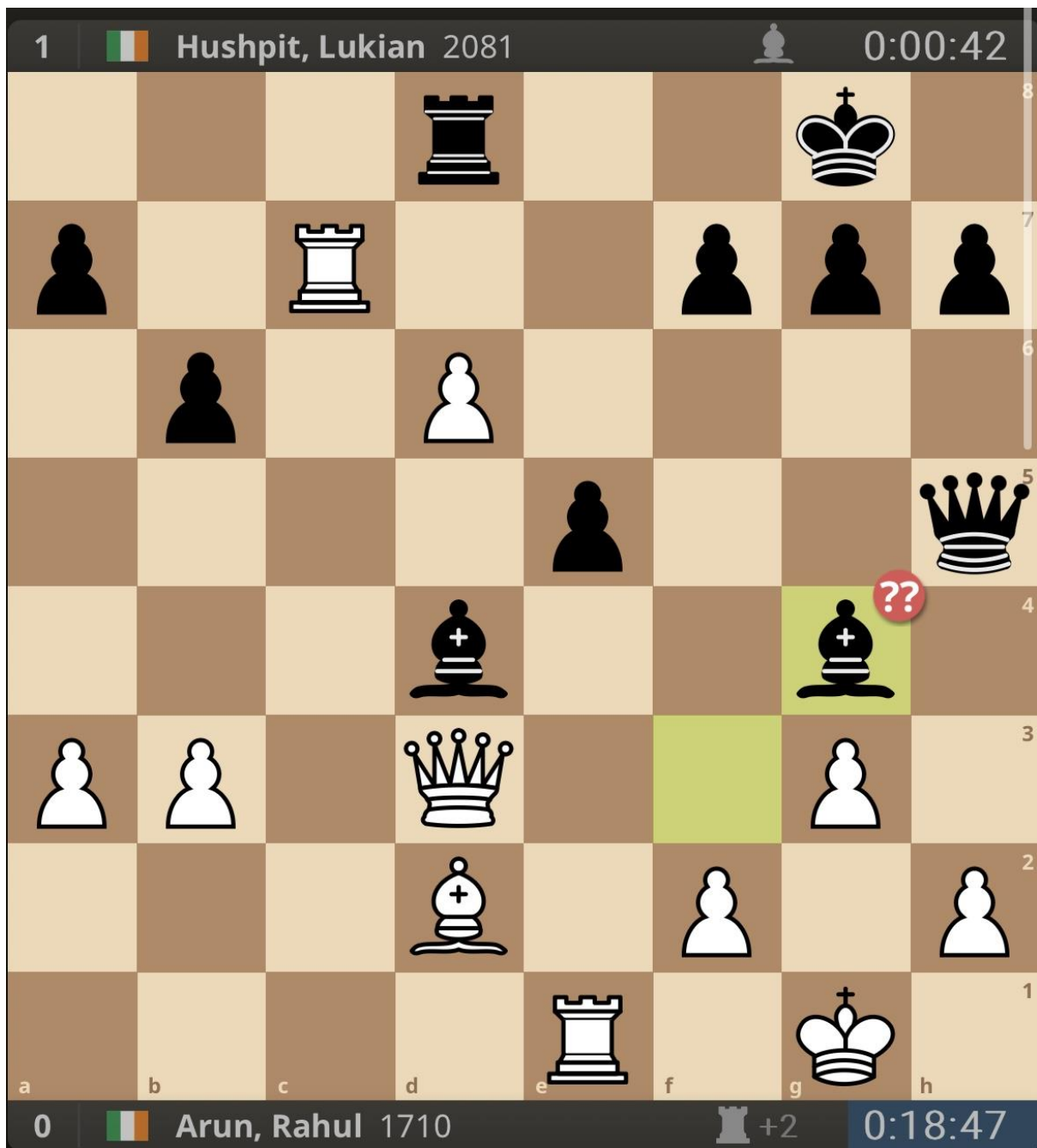
The girls under 15 section has only 7 competitors with Alena Souralova getting the bye in round 1. Board 1 was a draw and boards 2 and 3 were won by Turkish players Pelin Seyhan and Ela Keskinler. Keskinler played a particularly impressive game playing far beyond the strength of her rating of 1655 taking down top seed Maryna Petrenko in impressive fashion.



The game that caught my eye the most was board 3 where Seyhan accurately punished her opponent's (Eylul Ceren Gedik) mistake on move 30 with 30.Bc4 leaving her bishop on a seemingly have square although it's on an open file with the rook on c8 and Queen on c2 and despite there being many pieces in the way Seyhan found the beautiful 30. Na5 and white can't coordinate their pieces to get out of the pin. The game followed 31. Bxf7+ Qxf7 32. Bd4 Nb7 where the strength of the pin can really be felt. 33. Rc1 Nxc5 and white continued with 34. Qd2 not even trying Bxc5 which allows 34. Nd7 and black was a clear piece up and converted with great class.

O15

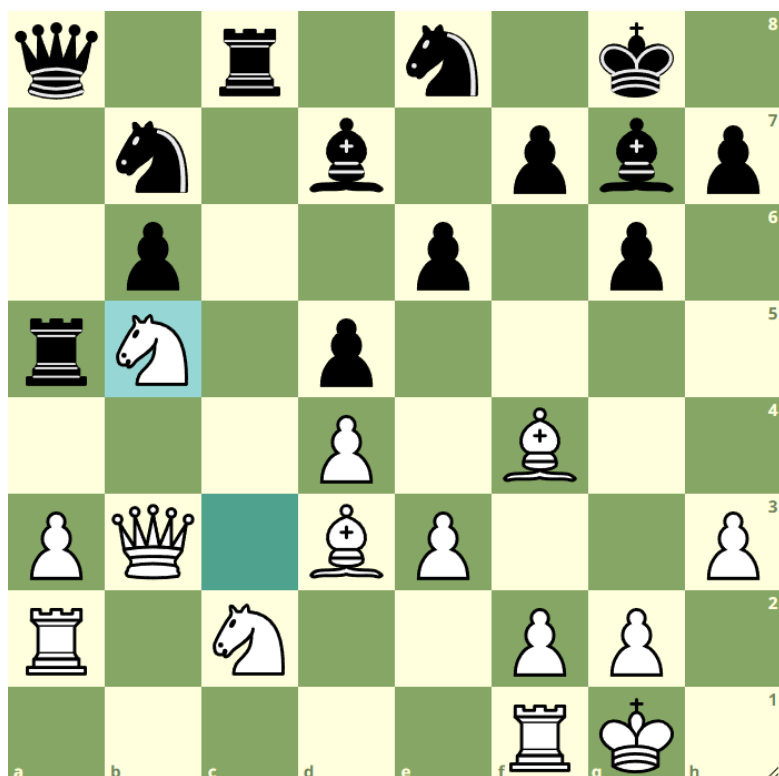
The open under 15 section looks to be one of the most tightly contested sections of the ESCC 2024. There are 6 players rated 2000+, more than any other section and there are only 71 rating points separating the 1st and 6th seeds. Expect this section to be decided on the final day!



The game I have decided to focus on is board 2 between 2 talented Irish players, Rahul Arun (1710) vs Lukian Hushpit (2081). Hushpit slowly built an edge in the opening and early middlegame but when Hushpit got low on time Arun did a great job of creating active counter play and Hushpit, when low on time decided to play an interesting exchange sacrifice leaving the position very double edged. The key position in the game can be seen on move 33 where Arun took what seemed like a free pawn with 33. Rxa7 although Hushpit found a lovely tactic with 33. Bxf2+!! with under a minute on the clock leaving Arun with no chances. Better for white would've been 33. Be3 stopping the sacrifice. The game followed 34. Kxf2 Qxh2+ 35. Ke3 Qxg3+ 36. Ke4 f5+ when white resigned as after 37. Kd5 black would've played Qxd3+ winning a Queen. White's only other option was 35. Kf1 after which Bxh3# is checkmate. Let's hope to see more enterprising games of chess like this in future rounds.

G17

The girls under 17 has 10 players making it a 9-round all-play all. The two top seeds were paired against each other in a critical opening game. The top game began with a grúndfeld, a very popular opening at this tournament, and after both players increased pressure on the following position was reached:



Lara proceeded with 1...Bxb5, missing 1...Rc4! Blocking the defence of the bishop. If 2.Bxc4 dxc4 3.Qc3 Rxb5 and black has the initiative, the pressure and a passed pawn. If white retreats with 2.Nc3 then Black has 2...Nc5! Taking advantage of the poor positioning of the knight on c3.

The game proceeded on the queenside until black sacrificed the exchange for a passed pawn on c2 which white was able to blockade and eventually capture, allowing for a winning ending for white.

O17

The open under 17's is led by two strong Turkish players over 2400 in rating, their nearest competition is Ben Sheehan (2080) of Ireland and two more Turkish players in the 2000 region as well as the Polish Szymon Starosciak.

Ben Sheehan played against Jamie Comley in an Irish derby. The game was a positional masterclass from Ben who utilised an open f-file to provide overwhelming pressure to the black kingside.

Overall the day was an exciting start to the tournament. Hopefully the players can take a lot of lessons from today and bring them forward into the rest of the tournament and indeed the rest of their chess career.

The full games are available here:

<https://lichess.org/broadcast/european-school-chess-championships-2024--o17/round-2/V4JFdTyc#boards>

And up-to-date results are available here:

<https://chess-results.com/tnr920239.aspx?lan=1>